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ABSTRACT

Comparative research indicates that almost without exception, late eighteenth century non-standard English pronunciation was very close to what is called Broad Australian. Present Australian English is closely akin to the blended, popular colloquial London English, spoken by the largest group of Australia's first settlers. This pronunciation differed greatly from the more restricted standard form which was growing in importance in England at the same time for social reasons. British English and Australian English now appear to be drawing closer together because in the former more and more "low-class" forms of colloquial eighteenth century speech are filtering through to respectability; such forms already exist in Australian pronunciation. (VM)

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EARLY AUSTRALIAN PRONUNCIATION

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Students of Australian pronunciation now recognise this mode of speech as a distinct form of English with its own history, and not as some sort of corrupted "good" English. What makes this interesting is whether the unique nature of the beginnings of this colony has made any significant difference to what has developed as our basic speech pattern.

It is usually agreed that what we call Broad and General Australian (after Mitchell, Delbridge, and others) was established quite early in Australia's history, and that Cultivated Australian is a survivor of Standard English introduced here. My view is that the basic low-class, broad amalgam was here and dominant at the beginning, and that Cultivated Australian, as we know it, probably developed later out of attempts to speak Standard English. Dr. John Bernard's comparison of the vowel nuclei of Standard English and Australian varieties tends to support this.

Linguistic evidence is not available for our English of nearly two centuries ago, but one can draw a pattern of what was popular London pronunciation from the mass of circumstantial evidence available in dictionaries, commentaries by grammarians and the like. London is chosen not only because of its considerable influence over a large area of southern England, but also because the largest group of Australia's first settlers came from this area.

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During the last decades of the eighteenth century a popular colloquial London English, with a fair blend of Cockney, would have had general currency, quite different from the more restricted standard form which was growing in importance for social and other reasons. The most numerous group of Australian settlers would have spoken the common London form, probably that which was described by the grammarian Buchanan (vii) as "that vicious, drawling, uncouth pronunciation among the generality of people...". Added to this established variety is the fact that late settlers were very keen to be assimilated quickly, to become "old chums", and this could well have meant a rejection of obvious dialectisms or not "with it" pronunciations. This Australian proto-broad was radical by educated English standards, but if the precedent of other transported languages is any guide it should then have changed very little, notwithstanding some attempts to emulate Standard English for social or educational reasons.

Some research was carried out to compare the pattern of present Broad Australian with the best accounts of late eighteenth century popular and low-class London speech, and with present trends in London pronunciation. The sounds which most distinguish the Australian accent were chosen, namely the long [i] and [u] vowels (which are usually narrow diphthongs) and the diphthongs [eɪ], [oʊ], [aɪ], and [aʊ]. Almost without exception the picture of late eighteenth century non-standard English was very close to what we call Broad Australian today. In some cases the description of nearly two centuries ago pointed to sounds which were not acknowledged in good English but which we easily recognise in Australian, for example the vowel element [ʌ] transforming the diphthong (er) to [ʌɪ].

The detail of this analysis cannot be reported fully here but the same trends of similarity also came through when distinctive centring diphthongs like [eə] and [ɪə], and some short vowels like [ʊ], and [a] before [n], [s], [f], [θ], and covered nasals, were examined. Our present Australian accent is not far removed from that of the blended London speech which came to the colony.

A study of present trends in popular London pronunciation shows certain changes taking place, and the pattern emerging for sounds like those above is approaching what we call General, and sometimes Broad, Australian. More exactly, it is permitting more and more of its own "low-class" forms of long ago to filter through to respectability. Such behaviour is quite normal and is borne out by the history of the language.

This study had to be made without accurate means of measurement and one had to generalise about patterns emerging in different places at different times. The result seems to justify the suggestion that the basis of what became common Australian may well have been deposited here at the beginning and did not emerge several decades later. In addition this form did not change very much in the next century or so except to be modified under pressure of a Standard English model. With the passing of time the popular standards of English and Australian have drawn closer together, the former as a result of normal linguistic change, the latter well established long ago as a result of the unique settlement of this country.

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